

INVENTOR : ANTHONY JENKINS
WILLIAM J. MCGANN

ASSIGNEE : GENERAL ELECTRIC COMPANY

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ION MOBILITY SPECTROMETERS WITH IMPROVED RESOLUTION

This application claims priority on U.S. Provisional Patent Appl. No. 60/400,192, filed July 31, 2002.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0001] The invention relates to ion mobility spectrometers that can be used to detect the presences of minuet amounts of substances of interest.

DESCRIPTION OF THE RELATED ART

[0002] Previous ion mobility spectrometers and ion trap mobility spectrometers are capable of uniquely identifying approximately 100 peaks in the drift spectrum. For many applications in drug and explosive trace detection this provides sufficient resolution to identify the target materials while maintaining very low false positive responses. This performance level is largely achieved by the use of dopants to eliminate many unwanted ionic species from innocent materials, thus producing simpler spectra with fewer "peaks". An example of an effective use of dopants is disclosed in U.S. Patent No. 5,491,337.

[0003] More recent improvements have been developed in which both positive and negative ion spectra are produced from the same sample. Such improvements are disclosed in U.S. Patent Application No. 10/103,601. This allows improved resolution for materials that produce both negative and positive ion spectra. It also allows both drugs and explosives to be detected in the same sample.

[0004] Yet another improvement allows the reaction rate chemistry of the ion transfer reactions to be measured prior to drifting ions down the drift tube, as disclosed in U.S. Patent Application No. 09/910,197. This provides increased detection capability and

resolution by recording the ionic spectrum or plasmagram at selected time intervals after injecting charge into the reaction chamber of the spectrometer.

[0005] The above methods and improvements have allowed superb detection and identification of most drugs and explosives. However, some ionic species remain difficult to identify separately.

[0006] The dopants added to the carrier flow entering the detector scavenge the charge from the weaker charge affinity materials. Thus, there is also a need to detect and identify a wide range of materials that would not normally be ionized.

[0007] The present invention provides for further increases in resolution (ability to determine the difference between two similar ions) and an increase in the range of materials that can be identified uniquely.

SUMMARY OF INVENTION

[0008] The present invention is a method and apparatus which modifies the design of either an ion mobility spectrometer (IMS) or an ion trap mobility spectrometer (ITMS) to provide improved resolution between coincidental or closely spaced peaks in the mobility spectrum. For example, the peaks from tetrahydro cannabinol (active ingredient in marijuana) and heroin are closely spaced. These two ions normally can be separated with some care to maintain all conditions constant, but occasionally the heroin contains other opiates such as papavarene, which makes the separation extremely difficult.

[0009] The time of flight of a specific ion is decided by the length of the drift tube, the electric field strength down the drift tube, and the mass and shape of the ion. The shape factor is difficult to predict, but generally, a more spherical ion will normally take a shorter time than an ion of the same mass which is more elongate. As the field strength is

increased, ions which exhibit a dipole moment may have more tendency to align with the field. This means that they may “tumble” less in a high field than in a low field. Thus the shape and polarity factor may cause two ions which have identical drift times at one field strength to have differing drift times at a different field strength. This parameter has been used in asymmetric field effect ion mobility detectors to provide a detection capability. The performance of such detectors has been inferior to traditional ion mobility detectors because only one ionic species can be measured at one time, and scanning through the range of differential mobilities is relatively slow.

[0010] The present invention takes advantage of the performance of the IMS and ITMS with the additional advantage of the asymmetric field effect ion mobility spectrometer. After a substance is detected and tentatively identified, the field strength is reduced electrically by reducing the voltage supplied to the field defining electrodes in the drift tube. This reduces the mobility of all ions, but not all are changed in proportion to the original drift time at high field strength. The peak shift between the two ion spectra is measured and compared against standard shifts held in a library or storage to confirm the identity of the material. If no match is obtained then the substance is unknown and is not identified. Thus false alarms from unknown materials are eliminated.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWING

[0011] FIG. 1 is a schematic illustration of a high field/low field circuit applied to an ion mobility spectrometer in accordance with the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

[0012] One embodiment of the design is shown in FIG. 1. The ion mobility detector 1 can be any of previously known detectors, IMS or ITMS. Furthermore, the design works

with switchable, positive and negative detection systems as described in US Patent Application Number 10/103,601. Also, the design is suitable for operation with the high frequency plasma discharge detector described in U.S. Patent Application Number 09/910,197. The field defining electrodes 2 which produce a continuous electric field down the drift tube are connected to a ladder network of resistors 3, which in turn are connected to a source of high voltage 4. The high voltage source 4 is held typically between 1000 and 1500 volts. The sample is introduced into the reaction chamber 5, of the detector, where molecules of interest are ionized. The ions are expelled down the drift tube at intervals of approximately 20 mS, where they move under the influence of the high field and are collected at the collector electrode 7. In an existing design, most of the ions of interest arrive at the collector electrode within 10 mS. In the present embodiment, the high field may be switched alternately by operation of the switch 8 to provide a low field strength down the drift tube. The low field strength preferably is half or less than half of the high field strength. Spectra are collected alternately at high and low field strengths and are compared with standard spectra from a library or storage to determine whether materials of interest are present.

[0013] In another embodiment of the design, the detector is operated at high field strength continuously. When a substance of interest is detected by the normal means, a confirmatory plasmagram may be obtained by switching to low field. In this way, two orthogonal measurements are made of both ion mobility and ion shape. This in turn leads to greater resolution and lower false alarms.

[0014] This new embodiment allows the detector to be operated without dopants added to the carrier flow. Normally, operation without dopant materials would allow many

unwanted substances to be analyzed, producing very high false alarm rates. With the added specificity of the ionic "shape" measurement, false alarms can be held at acceptable levels without dopant materials. This is particularly useful to the high frequency plasma discharge ionization technique, since much higher charge densities can be injected into the reaction chamber, which provides a greater probability of ionization for molecules of low charge affinity. With previous embodiments, high charge densities necessitate higher dopant concentrations in order to maintain low false alarm rates.

[0015] When coupled with the high frequency plasma ionization and no dopant chemistry, this new method of operation allows many more substances to be detected at very high sensitivity. This provides a capability of detecting a much wider range of materials, such as human body odors, which may be used for diagnosis of diseases. Also, some of the plastic explosives which have very low vapor pressure from the active explosive ingredient can now be detected by the vapor emission from the plasticizer. It is well known that dogs do not detect the active explosive ingredient of plastic explosives, but rely on detection of solvents and vapors from the plasticizers. This new method can, therefore, be employed to detect more threat materials by vapor emissions which are not detected by previous ion mobility detectors.